

# ENTERTAINMENTS

## Meatballs put Reitman in the gravy

Seven years ago, film producer-director Ivan Reitman was living in the Town of Mount Royal, \$100,000 in debt. Today his bank balance is bulging, he owns a large house in the upper-class Los Angeles suburb of Bel Air and his mailbox is stuffed with lucrative offers from every studio in Hollywood. The road between here and there was paved with the profits from a series of B-grade horror films (*Shivers*, *Rabid*, *Death Weekend*) and, especially, last year's wildly successful comedy of fraternity low-life, *Animal House*. But Reitman was not satisfied to rest on his box-office laurels; last summer, while *Animal House* was breaking records Reitman was busy in Northern Ontario filming this year's runaway summer hit, *Meatballs*. The Star's film critic Martin Malina interviewed Reitman on a recent visit to Montreal in order to find out what makes Ivan run.



*Meatballs* director Ivan Reitman (right) and producer Dan Goldberg.

THE CANADIAN movie boom is so recent that the names associated with it seem new to most casual observers. But they're not. Sure, there are a few lawyers and stockbrokers who have just made the switch, but the majority of Canadian film-makers active today have served long and often arduous apprenticeships.

Take Ivan Reitman. He directed *Meatballs* (at the Westmount Square, Laval, Dorval, Kent, La Cité and Greenfield Park theatres), which is now on its way to becoming the biggest Canadian box-office hit ever made. (In its very first week, in the New York City area alone, the film grossed \$1.5 million, which Paramount Pictures says is a record for any film it has distributed. Among previous Canadian hits, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* grossed \$10 million and *Murder By Decree* close to \$8 million; after only three weeks on North American screens, *Meatballs* is about to surpass them.)

Born in Czechoslovakia and raised in Toronto, Reitman is only 32 years old but he's been making movies for 11 of them. At 21, mainly on the strength of a B.A. in music from McMaster University, he talked himself into a film

course offered by the National Film Board. There he got his hands on a camera and some film stock and shot his first film, an abstract 5-minute short consisting of electronic music matched to images of Expo '67.

This whetted Reitman's film appetite and back at McMaster he got the school's film board to finance a 23-minute comedy called *Orientation*, about the problems of a freshman student. *Orientation* was promptly sold to the CBC for TV showing and to 20th Century-Fox for theatrical distribution.

The star of *Orientation* was Dan Goldberg and he and Reitman have been friends and partners ever since. They teamed as co-producers on a film called *The Columbus of Sez*, based on a Victorian underground classic, *My Secret Life*. Though only mildly exploitative, the film was seized by the police and Reitman was charged with obscenity and placed on a year's probation.

Reitman's next picture was more ambitious. Called *Fozy Lady*, it was made with \$200,000 solicited from The Canadian Film Development Corporation, Famous Players (the theatre chain) and Cinépix (the distribution house) of Montreal. Unfortunately, *Fozy Lady* flopped. It was Reitman's

first and only failure in movies.

His next picture, *Cannibal Girls*, was made on a shoestring budget and sold at a profit to American International Pictures. Even more profitable were Reitman's subsequent films: *Shivers* (it played in Montreal as *The Parasite Murders*) directed by David Cronenberg, William Fruet's *Death Weekend* and Cronenberg's *Rabid*.

But the icing on the cake was last year's *National Lampoon's Animal House*. Profitable is hardly adequate to describe *Animal House*. To date the film has grossed \$125 million at North American box-offices, placing it in the top ten all-time Hollywood hits. Reitman co-produced the picture (and wisely retained a percentage of its revenues).

Despite its reputation as a "sleeper," *Animal House* was no fluke. Certainly not for Reitman. A longtime fan of *National Lampoon*, he'd approached the magazine's publisher, Matty Simmons, in 1974 with an idea for a movie. Reitman was in New York that year co-producing *The Magic Show* on Broadway and he tried to sell Simmons on "a class comedy with true contemporary humor." Simmons didn't buy the movie idea but he did try a stage

show and he hired Reitman to produce it off-Broadway. The show was a hit and helped to launch such comic talents as those of John Belushi, Gilda Radner (see page D-4) and Bill Murray.

It also established a working rapport between Simmons and Reitman and it was only a matter of time before they teamed on a *National Lampoon* movie.

There was no trouble selling the idea to Hollywood. "Universal bought it right away," Reitman recalls.

The trouble began when the studio saw the original script. They didn't like it one bit. They thought it was too raunchy and unfunny. They asked for a rewrite. Then another. And another.

"We had a development deal with Universal," Reitman explains, "but that didn't mean they had to make the movie. They kept turning down our scripts until, at one point, the project was on the verge of going into 'turn around' (i.e. being dropped by one studio and picked up by another). We always had a few strong supporters in the company but the hierarchy didn't think much of the movie; they saw it, at best, as a little quirkie that might pick up a bit of cash."

That's not how Reitman saw the project.

"Every once in a while I get involved in something that I know is going to be a hit. I felt it on *Shivers*; I felt it in *The Magic Show*; and I felt it very strongly on *Animal House*. I told Universal they ought to make the movie because it would save their ass when *Jaws II* and *The Wiz* flopped. They looked at me like I was a crazy person!"

Reitman also felt it on *Meatballs*. "I decided I would give myself another shot at directing, which I hadn't done since *Cannibal Girls*. I called Dan Goldberg in Toronto. I told him I wanted to direct and I needed a script set in a summer camp."

That was in May 1978. *Animal House* was in the can and being readied for release. On the strength of that film and his previous record Reitman could have gone to a Hollywood studio for financing. But he was in a rush.

"I wanted to be filming before the summer was over and it would have taken a year and a half to get a studio's OK."

Goldberg came through. He had recruited a couple of old friends, Len Blum and Janis Allen, to write a script. It was ready for Reitman's June 1 deadline.

But it was terrible. "It was set in a summer camp," Reitman remembers, "but it was a mess. I hesitated. This was supposed to mark my return to directing, don't forget. I thought, 'Oh well, I'll wait till next year.'"

But Goldberg convinced Reitman to give the writers another try. They came to Montreal (where, until last January, Reitman and his wife, actress Geneviève Deloir, owned a house; they now live in Los Angeles) and holed up in a hotel room and began rewriting.

"It began to improve," Reitman recalls, "and I decided the story needed a strong central character. I thought of Bill Murray. I said, 'Write it for Murray.' I'd no idea if we could get him but Murray was definitely the model for Tripper, the camp crazy but gentle head counsellor."

Reitman also called Harold Ramis, the chief writer on *Animal House*. "He was broke (*Animal House* hadn't yet opened). I said I'd give him \$6,000 to do a new draft on *Meatballs*. He agreed and suddenly a film began to emerge."

That's when André Link and John Dunning of Cinépix entered the picture.

"They were developing a summer camp film of their own which had nothing to do with me. It was a girl's coming-out story with a suspense twist. Set in a summer camp. I said to John (Dunning): 'Nobody but flies are going to see your movie.'"

But Reitman needed Dunning and Link. Reitman had no money and the others did. They had talked the Canadian Film Development Corporation and Famous Players into committing close to half a million dollars in their summer camp movie. "I had no time to raise that kind of money. So I talked John and André into converting their summer camp story into my summer camp story."

So Reitman had money and a script, but he still had no star. The draft that he had sent to Murray was turned down. "It was his first starring role," Reitman explains, "and he wanted to be careful about what he decided to do."

By the time the script was revised, Murray couldn't be found. "He was off in Oregon or Washington State playing baseball. No one could track him down. I was desperate. I sent scripts all over the Northwest, to every little motel I could find."

Eventually he found the right one and Murray said OK. That was August 1. The same day, at Camp White Pine in Halliburton, Ontario (120 miles north of Toronto), *Meatballs*, as it came to be called (mainly because a skin flick was already calling itself *Summer Camp*) went before the cameras. Murray showed up two days later and immediately went to work.

That week was a happy one for Reitman in another way, too. *Animal House* had just opened and was beginning to set box-office records.

"It became apparent," Reitman says with a toothy grin, "that I wouldn't

have to worry about money for the rest of my life."

Five months later a "rough cut" of *Meatballs* was ready and Reitman showed it to some major Hollywood distributors. That was a mistake, he now admits. "Some things worked, and some things didn't. The distributors were interested but weren't bowled over."

Toward that end, Reitman added some scenes (mainly between Murray and Chris Makepeace, who plays a sly camper Murray befriends) and re-edited the film.

The second trade screening, in Toronto in March, was vastly more successful. Home Box Office, the American cable TV network, bought cable rights to the film for \$1 million. A month later Reitman was ready for the majors. He and his partners rented a theatre in Los Angeles and invited all the major distributors to see the film at once instead of screening it separately for each. It was a sneak preview and the audience loved it. So did the distributors.

"Everyone said, 'Let's make a deal.' But only two studios were willing to open the picture in summer, which we insisted on. We negotiated with those two and ended up with Paramount. They bought *Meatballs* for the U.S., for Canada, for television and for foreign distribution as well. We kept the music, publishing and all ancillary rights."

The price was over \$4 million. The film cost only \$1.6 million to make.

Where does Reitman go from here? "Nowhere for a while. I'm on vacation. I've worked hard for two years and I need a rest."

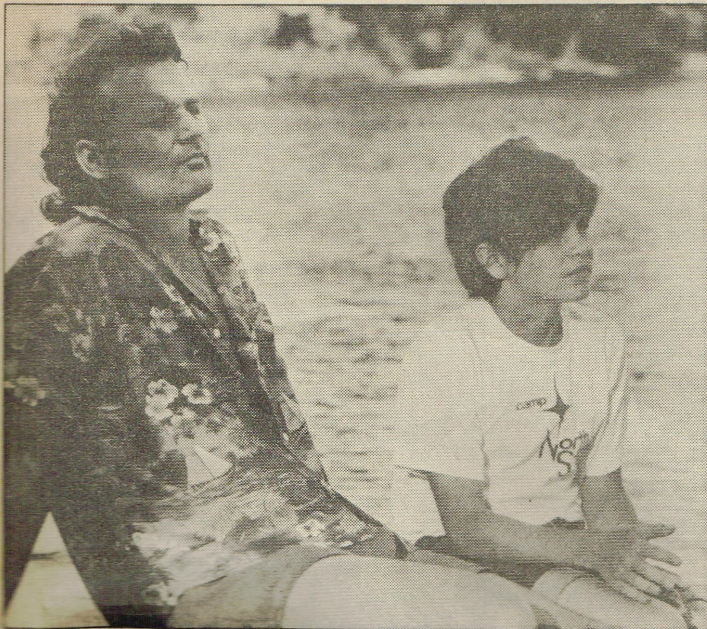
Hollywood, of course, doesn't agree. They've been flooding Reitman's mailbox with scripts and film proposals. The only one he hasn't turned down involves a sequel to *Animal House* for Universal.

"It was an offer I couldn't refuse," he says. "They had to renegotiate and we came up with a terrific deal. Boy, is it good! The original cast will all return and the same writers will do the script."

But beyond that nothing is definite. He would "like to do a dramatic film, maybe a love story, and possibly another Broadway show. I enjoy the stage but I like movies best. I like directing best."

Will he work in Canada or in the U.S.?

"Both, probably. In Hollywood you have the protection of a studio but in Canada you have independence. You can participate in any level of filmmaking that you choose. It's also easier to raise money here...not that I think I'll ever face that problem!"



Bill Murray and Chris Makepeace.